

CASE STUDY

Digital Outpatients evaluation demonstrates 7% of appointments could be substituted for a digital questionnaire

An evaluation conducted at Nottingham University Hospitals analysed the success of the MyOnlineCare project, started 5 years ago within the Trust as a trailblazer for the digital management of outpatient appointments.

The Digital Outpatients project was established by Health Innovation East Midlands in 2018, born out of a nationally identified priority to reduce the number of in-person outpatient appointments. The initiative was developed to ease the pressure on acute hospitals and to ensure that patients were not being brought into hospital unnecessarily.

Health Innovation East Midlands focused on the use of digital questionnaires as a replacement for an in-person follow up appointment. Nottingham University Hospitals (NUH) were approached to act as a demonstrator site as NUH already had an existing commercial arrangement in place with DrDoctor, providing a platform to build from.

A dedicated clinical lead and 'champion' for the project was engaged from the outset and was instrumental to its success, along with a dedicated project team setting up the initiative on the ground. The questionnaires would be clinically compiled and verified, to ensure safety and completeness. Patients would only be onboarded if the clinical team felt they were a good fit for a digital pathway.

Patients on the digital pathway who were due for review were sent a link to a secure questionnaire which could be completed on any web enabled device. The questionnaire responses were displayed to clinicians in a clinic style screen and initial indications showed that a digital review took an average of 2 minutes compared to 15 minutes for a face to face appointment.

The programme is now entering its **5th year** and is still onboarding. **Over 60 pathways** are now live with the solution and are using digital questionnaires to either better inform or to replace the in-person appointment.

The evaluation ultimately shows that there is potential to replace 7% of all appointments with a digital questionnaire, which if realised could account for 11,000 saved appointments in the Trust annually.

An evaluation conducted by Unity Insights highlighted that **4 out of 5 patients found the platform easy to use** and felt that the questionnaires helped to focus ongoing conversations on what matters to them. Patients who were able to replace their appointment entirely with a digital questionnaire were the most positive about the solution.

Staff perception was also positive with 100% of those surveyed finding the solution preferable to the previous pathway and all clinicians felt that the information provided by patients was sufficient to inform decisions around ongoing care.

Recommendations from the evaluation included the need for better data collection and a re-focus on replacing appointments rather than informing the in-person appointment, for maximum impact for patients and the Trust.

What we did

Following the project's success at NUH, Health Innovation East Midlands onboarded and funded **two fast follower sites** during 2020/21 – University Hospitals of Derby and Burton and Northampton and Kettering General Hospitals who continue to engage and onboard specialities onto their programmes.

Following the success of the programme NHS England are now conducting a **national pilot** of digital questionnaires and are seeking to onboard ten Trusts to prove the benefits on a wider scale.

Requirements for successful deployment

The programme highlighted the following learning for successful deployment:

- A **dedicated project team** on hand to support specialties to consider which pathways might be a good fit for digital questionnaires and to help answer questions on the ground.
- **A clinical lead who is given time to dedicate to the project.** The clinical lead will support the aims of the project and champion the initiative to peers throughout the Trust.
- **Dedicated time allocated to consultants** within each specialty to compile and test questionnaire content, to ensure they are safe, comprehensive and robust.
- **Accurate measurement of benefits and communication of these** across the organisation to raise awareness of the potential of the project and gain buy in from new specialties.